



# Saskatchewan Poverty Progress Profile

CANADA WITHOUT POVERTY, 2015

## OVERVIEW

In the wake of a large grass large grassroots movement towards developing a poverty strategy, Lieutenant Governor Schofield announced in his October 2014 Speech from the Throne that Saskatchewan would develop its first Poverty Reduction Strategy.<sup>1</sup> Following the announcement, the Ministry of Social Services created and appointed the *Saskatchewan Advisory Group on Poverty Reduction*.<sup>2</sup> The 11-member group consists of five in-government officials and six community representatives from the health, labour, justice, education and social service sectors within Saskatchewan. The Advisory Group gathers input from community groups and the public regarding the province's current policies and programs, and will provide recommendations to the government for a comprehensive plan.<sup>3</sup>

This past spring, the Advisory Group launched an online public consultation website where individuals, communities, governments and businesses were invited to provide feedback on how to address poverty.<sup>4</sup> In April 2015, 100 representatives from over 60 organizations gathered in Saskatoon for a live poverty roundtable hosted by the Advisory Group.<sup>5</sup> In August 2015, the Group released recommendations on income security, housing and homelessness, early childhood development, education and training, employment and health, and food security<sup>94</sup> in order for the government to cut poverty rates in half within the next five years (2020).<sup>96</sup>

## Action on the Ground

Prior to 2014, the government of Saskatchewan had suggested that their poverty program report (PPR) *From Dependence to Independence Actions and Investments for Saskatchewan's Most Vulnerable People*<sup>6</sup> was their provincial anti-poverty action plan. However, the report lacked features of a provincial strategy including community engagement, clear goals, targets and timelines or an implementation strategy. The report did not address the distinctive ways in which poverty affects certain marginalized groups. Since the announcement of an official strategy,

organizations on the ground are working to ensure this new plan includes consultation with marginalized groups and appropriate mechanisms for accountability.

The provincial government gave a special thanks to *Poverty Costs* during its strategy announcement.<sup>7</sup> The campaign was launched in March 2014 by antipoverty advocates such as the *Saskatoon Poverty Reduction Partnership*, the *Saskatoon Anti-Poverty Coalition* and the *Upstream Institute for a Healthy Society*.<sup>8</sup> In October 2014, they released *Poverty Costs Saskatchewan: A New Approach to Prosperity for All*.<sup>9</sup> The report states that in 2010 alone, poverty cost Saskatchewan \$3.8 million in heightened service use and missing opportunities for contributions to the GDP and taxes.<sup>10</sup>

Several working members of the campaign now act on the provincial *Advisory Group on Poverty Reduction*.<sup>11</sup> *Poverty Costs* also continues to independently advocate for meaningful engagement with those who have a lived experience of poverty via the Advisory Group's consultation process. They have created a toolkit for organizations to facilitate local group discussions and submit information to the Advisory group anonymously.<sup>12</sup> In May 2015, *Poverty Costs* published results from their own independent consultations. Respondents strongly identified with changes needed to access to housing, employment opportunities, supports for training/education, supports for childcare, universal guaranteed income and minimum wages/social assistance indexed to the costs of living.<sup>13</sup>

Local advocacy groups like the *Regina Anti-Poverty Ministry* continue to draw attention towards the large gaps that are tolerated in Saskatchewan's income security, social housing, childcare and health care systems.<sup>14</sup> The Ministry has spoken publicly about how the government's decisions in the latest provincial budget undermine its commitment to poverty reduction.<sup>15</sup>

## MEASURING PROGRESS

### Statistical Indicators of Poverty (*Unofficial Measurement Tools*)

	<b>LICO<sup>16</sup></b> Low Income Cut-off After-tax	<b>LIM<sup>17</sup></b> Low-Income Measurement	<b>MBM<sup>18</sup></b> Market Basket Measure	<b>Food Bank Usage<sup>19</sup></b>	<b>Food Bank Usage<sup>19</sup></b>	<b>Welfare Recipients<sup>21</sup></b>
<b>2005</b>	99,000, <b>10.8%</b>	164,000, <b>17.8%</b>	115,000, <b>12.5%</b>	24,600, <b>2.5%</b>	*	*
<b>2008</b>	69,000, <b>7.3%</b>	139,000, <b>14.7%</b>	98,000, <b>10.3%</b>	17,751, <b>1.7%</b>	9.7%	46,950
<b>2009</b>	68,000, <b>7.1%</b>	113,000, <b>11.7%</b>	99,000, <b>10.3%</b>	18,878, <b>1.84%</b>	8.2%	42,530
<b>2010</b>	63,000, <b>6.4%</b>	116,000, <b>11.9%</b>	99,000, <b>10.1%</b>	22,662, <b>2.2%</b>	9.2%	46,820
<b>2011</b>	52,000, <b>5.3%</b>	112,000, <b>11.3%</b>	97,000, <b>9.8%</b>	25,433, <b>2.4%</b>	11.8%	48,370
<b>2012</b>	61,000, <b>6%</b>	128,000, <b>12.7%</b>	107,000, <b>10.6%</b>	24,621, <b>2.3%</b>	12.5%	47,620
<b>2013</b>	*	131,000, <b>12.7%**</b>	*	22,465, <b>2.06%</b>	*	48,090
<b>2014</b>	*	*	*	26,820, <b>2.4%</b>	*	50,160

\* Data not available

\*\* Please note that data from the 2013 calculation of Low Income Measure (LIM) is from the Canadian Income Survey (CIS) instead of the Survey of Labour and Income Dynamics (SLID)".

### Notes on Critical Thematic Areas

- HUMAN RIGHTS:** The Saskatchewan Government does not reference human rights legislation in addressing poverty. In the government's publication, *From Dependence to Independence*, human rights was not considered. Thus far, it has not been included in any official discussion of the strategy in development.
- INCOME SUPPORT:** 5.1% of Saskatchewan's population are living on support benefits that are far too low to transition out of poverty.<sup>22</sup> Indexed to 2011 rates, the Market Basket Measure income rate for a family of four in Saskatoon is \$34,897.<sup>23</sup> In 2013, the same family received a maximum of \$25,171 in income assistance under the *Saskatchewan Assistance Program (SAP)*.<sup>24</sup> SAP Payments for a single employable person are a mere \$8,901 and payments for a person with a disability, only \$11,364.<sup>25</sup>

The government has not indicated any changes or improvements to the *SAP*, Saskatchewan's most common social assistance program. In 2013, *Saskatchewan Assured Income for Disability (SAID)* benefits were increased for the second year in a row. This benefit readjustment is part of a four year-plan to increase *SAID* benefits by \$350 for individuals (and by \$400 for couples) before 2016.<sup>26</sup>

3. **HOUSING:** Saskatchewan's *Plan for Growth* establishes the province's goals for 2020, investing \$344 million to add 12,600 new affordable housing units to the province.<sup>27</sup> Interestingly, most of these funds appear to privilege private home ownership over home rental

In August 2014 the *Saskatchewan Housing Corporation* and *Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation* extended their bilateral *Investment in Affordable Housing Agreement (IAH)* until 2019.<sup>28</sup> Under the 2011-2014 *IAH* agreement, the province assisted 1673 families living in inadequate accommodations.<sup>29</sup> The agreement renewal commits funding towards developing 251 units, which includes new housing for the "hard-to-house" and low-income persons, rent subsidies and repairs/renovations to existing housing.<sup>30</sup>

Recently the Minister responsible for the *Saskatchewan Housing Corporation* announced that *Affordable Housing Program* units in cities across the province are transitioning to the *Social Housing Program*.<sup>31</sup> Under the *Affordable Housing Program*, income is the only eligibility factor and tenants' rent is fixed, set in relation to market rental rates.<sup>32</sup> Under *Social Housing*, tenants' income and asset limits are both eligibility criteria.<sup>33</sup> Rent is adjusted to 30% of household income. Applicants for government housing in Moose Jaw, Saskatoon, Regina and Prince Albert and other urban areas will now be eligible only for the *Social Housing Program*.<sup>34</sup> This change is expected to eliminate at least 20% of current tenants from the program, pushing them into the private market.<sup>35</sup> Those who remain will face rent increases as early as March 2016 - rent is set to go up by \$100.<sup>36</sup> Currently, there are 552 people on the waitlist for affordable housing in in Moose Jaw, Saskatoon, Regina and Prince Albert alone.<sup>37</sup>

4. **EDUCATION:** In the *Saskatchewan Plan for Growth*, the government sets several education goals, including reducing graduation disparities between First Nations and Métis students and their non-aboriginal peers, expanding alternative credentials for high school completion and increasing supports for at-risk children and youth.<sup>38</sup> To help guide the education system to reach these goals, the Ministry of Education has introduced the *Student First* approach, which centres on the student experience.<sup>39</sup> Following the completion of a province-wide engagement process, the Ministry announced the creation of the *Education Sector Strategic Plan (ESSP)*.<sup>40</sup> Some immediate objectives are: 1) developing a First Nations

and Métis student achievement initiative and 2) implementing a unified set of high impact reading assessment, instruction and intervention strategies for the coming year.<sup>41</sup>

In March 2015, the government made changes to its *Graduate Retention Program (GRP)*, which had provided a refund of up to \$20,000 for students attending in-province universities.<sup>42</sup> The refundable tax credit is now a non-refundable tax credit.<sup>43</sup> To claim the *GRP* tax rebate, an individual must make at least \$36,000 in taxable income while single parents must earn at least \$54,000.<sup>44</sup> The government is investing in lesser forms of student funding, increasing finance to the *Saskatchewan Advantage Scholarship*, which provides Grade 12 students with small scholarships of \$500 to use towards post-secondary tuition.<sup>45</sup>

5. **EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE:** Currently, there are roughly 14,200 licensed childcare spaces in Saskatchewan.<sup>46</sup> In the PPR, the government committed to creating 2,000 additional licensed childcare spaces over four years beginning in 2012.<sup>47</sup> With an increase from 12,275 regulated spaces in 2012,<sup>48</sup> the government has created 1,925 new spaces.

Despite this significant increase in childcare availability, Saskatchewan still lags far behind other provinces and territories. In 2013 Saskatchewan remained the province with the lowest share of regulated childcare spaces at 10.5%.<sup>49</sup> The latest provincial budget announces a freeze in the expansion of childcare spaces and pre-kindergarten programs.<sup>50</sup> As a result, Saskatchewan's rate of regulated childcare spaces will likely decrease as the population continues to grow. Despite new funding for Child Care Subsidies<sup>51</sup>, the provincial government has cut \$972,000 in funding to the program since 2011.<sup>52</sup>

6. **HEALTH CARE:** Saskatchewan has recently made some significant strides to increase accessibility of its healthcare system. In October 2014, the provincial government amended *The Pharmacy Act*.<sup>53</sup> The changes allow pharmacists to administer certain vaccines and injectable drugs as well as order, access and use laboratory tests.<sup>54</sup>

Also in 2014, the Saskatchewan government officially endorsed the *Mental Health and Addictions Action Plan*.<sup>55</sup> The inter-ministerial Action Plan outlines 16 recommendations to create meaningful change for people awaiting mental health and addiction services.<sup>56</sup> These recommendations will enhance access and capacity, focusing on prevention and early intervention and partnering with First Nations and Metis Peoples.<sup>57</sup> The plan recognizes that poverty and homelessness contribute to poorer health outcomes.<sup>58</sup>

In June 2015, the government released a progress report in response to the Ministry of Health's *Patient First Review* completed in 2009.<sup>59</sup> The *Patient First Review* was a commis-

sioned report providing recommendations on how to improve the patient experience.<sup>60</sup> The Ministry's latest report shows Saskatchewan appears to be improving on timely access to healthcare, specifically surgery. Compared to 2010, the number of patients waiting more than 3 months for surgery has decreased by 89%.<sup>61</sup> The report also notes improved access in rural areas by adopting a team-based primary health care (PHC) model.<sup>62</sup> Some outstanding areas for focus include chronic disease rates, particularly diabetes which is increasing by 3,000 cases each year.<sup>63</sup>

7. **EMPLOYMENT SUPPORT:** Saskatchewan industries benefit by providing many jobs in the province. As of March 2015, unemployment rate remains the lowest in the country at 4.4%, well below the national unemployment rate of 6.8%.<sup>64</sup> In October 2014 Saskatchewan's minimum wage was increased to \$10.20 per hour.<sup>65</sup> On par with Alberta, this is currently the lowest minimum wage in the country.<sup>66</sup> In Spring 2014, the government introduced regulations in the newly consolidated *Saskatchewan Employment Act*, which index the minimum wage.<sup>67</sup> The rate will increase every October according to changes in the Consumer Price Index and the Average Hourly Wage for the previous year; minimum wage is set to increase to \$10.50 this coming fall.<sup>68</sup>

The *Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (CCPA)* has concluded that a living wage in Regina is \$16.46 per hour.<sup>69</sup> *CCPA* notes that 27% of workers in Regina are earning less than the Living Wage in 2012, with at least 30,000 employees struggling every day to make ends meet.<sup>70</sup>

The government assists low-income parents who are working through *The Saskatchewan Employment Supplement (SES)*. Currently, the *SES* serves parents with children under the age of 18, however, changes effective October 2015 will restrict the service to families with children aged 12 and under.<sup>71</sup> This change is expected to save \$1 million, though the provincial government has already cut \$2.56 million in funding to the *SES* since 2011.<sup>72</sup>

8. **COMMUNITY BUILDING/INVESTMENT:** The *Patient First Review* progress report highlights that 11 Hub and Centre of Responsibility (CORs) have been opened across the province since 2011.<sup>73</sup> CORs provide immediate, coordinated intervention from a multi-disciplinary team to address domestic violence, housing, mental health and addictions. COR teams bring together representatives from the RCMP and police services, social services, corrections, school boards, local health region and First Nations assembly members.<sup>74</sup> Following the establishment of the first COR in Prince Albert, the city has seen a 37% decrease in violent crimes rates.<sup>75</sup> Prince Albert has also seen an 11% decrease in emergency room visits from 2011 to 2012.<sup>76</sup> In the 2014 Speech from the Throne, the government committed to expanding the number of CORs to 15.<sup>77</sup>

In May 2014, *Sweet Dreams*, a supported living home for at-risk single mothers opened its doors in Saskatoon.<sup>78</sup> *Sweet Dreams* was opened under a Social Impact Bond funding model, the first of its kind in Canada.<sup>79</sup> Under this model, the provincial government targets a specific social outcome using investments from the private sector and makes an agreement to pay investors a pre-arranged sum only if the goal is reached on time.<sup>80</sup> *Sweet Dreams* is designed for single mothers with children under the age of 8 who are at risk for Child and Family Services Intervention.<sup>81</sup> Service providers at the *Saskatoon Downtown Youth Centre Inc* provide families affordable accommodations and support while mothers find employment, complete their education and complete life skills training.<sup>82</sup>

## Views From Outside the Saskatchewan Government

The Saskatchewan Advocate for Children and Youth, Bob Pringle, has commended the Government of Saskatchewan for taking steps towards creating a poverty reduction strategy.<sup>83</sup> In May 2014, Pringle officially recommended a poverty reduction strategy in his report *Two Tragedies: Holding Systems Accountable*, following the death of a child in Saskatchewan foster care.<sup>84</sup> He argued that many intersecting risk factors for child intervention include poverty-related conditions like mental illness, disability and addictions.<sup>85</sup> He stated that a comprehensive plan will help advance the *Saskatchewan Child and Family Agenda* goals, assisting in prevention and early intervention.<sup>86</sup> Pringle states that the same level of commitment is needed to respond to the needs of Aboriginal youth, children and families.<sup>87</sup>

The *Upstream Institute for a Healthy Society* expresses concern for First Nations populations. 64% of status First Nations children live in poverty in Saskatchewan, the highest First Nations child poverty rate in the country.<sup>88</sup> *Upstream* is concerned that the poverty strategy will only have jurisdiction over poverty observed/experienced outside of reserves.<sup>89</sup> As they point out, the federal government is the ultimate authority for economic development and social services on reserves but continually fail to live up to these responsibilities.<sup>90</sup>

Chuk Plante, Policy Director for *Upstream* writes, “In addition to committing to eliminate child poverty among off-reserve populations, the provincial government needs to speak out and put pressure on the federal government to live up to its responsibilities to on-reserve populations.”<sup>91</sup> He writes a new approach needs to be taken by Saskatchewan in the spirit of *Jordan's Principle*, where payment disputes between federal and provincial governments are put aside to prioritize needed services for children. Plante stresses any approach to poverty reduction must include meaningful engagement with First Nations Chiefs, councils and communities and following through with meaningful action.

## THE BOTTOM LINE

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Poverty remains a significant problem in Saskatchewan, with rates higher than the national average. Saskatchewan's child poverty rate is 25.5%, well above the national rate of 19.1%.<sup>92</sup> When compared to other province and territories' child poverty rates, Saskatchewan is third only to Nunavut and Manitoba.<sup>93</sup> An effective strategy must include detailed targets, timelines, benchmarks, adequate funding and a reporting process. The *Poverty Costs* campaign advocates for a plan that considers input from the community, pushing the provincial government to take action beyond their jurisdiction to respond to widespread Aboriginal poverty. Saskatchewan's recent progress in areas like job creation and accessible healthcare will be essential in reducing poverty. However, central parts of Saskatchewan's social system like income assistance and housing are in serious need of change. The government has taken important steps towards implementing a poverty reduction strategy. Now provincial decision-makers are duty-bound to follow through with an action plan that is not only grounded in legislation, but truly holistic as well.

### For More Information

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## ENDNOTES

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